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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR GENERAL FRASER'S NOV 30 - DEC 1 VISIT TO
COLOMBIA

REF: BOGOTA 3305

CLASSIFIED BY: William R. Brownfield, Ambassador, Department of
State, EXEC; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Your return to Colombia is an opportunity to reassure the Colombians of our commitment to their fight against illegal drugs and illegal armed groups. Colombians have begun to perceive our decision not to be baited by Venezuela's bellicose rhetoric, violence against Colombians along the border, and trade freeze as a failure to stand by an ally. Your visit will be a welcome sign of our senior engagement and commitment to the bilateral relationship. Government of Colombia (GOC) officials will likely try to gauge USG thinking regarding DCA implementation and military construction plans during your visit. Your visit will also serve as an opportunity to underscore USG commitment to human rights and to rooting out corruption. A high profile narco-corruption case against a retired rear admiral appears poised for dismissal amidst controversy, raising concerns about impunity. Despite challenges, the Colombia Strategic Development Initiative (CSDI) continues to progress and is considering activation of a fourth CSDI priority zone -- the Northern Band. End Summary.

DCA IMPLEMENTATION

¶2. (C) Embassy Bogota welcomes the visit of General Douglas M. Fraser and delegation. Colombian Minister of Defense Gabriel Silva Lujan and Colombian Armed Forces Commander Freddy Padilla de Leon will also welcome your return visit to Colombia -- and the opportunity to show you the Colombian facilities at Palanquero, Apiay and Tolemeida. They will likely engage you regarding the military construction plans at Palanquero air base related to the recently signed DCA. On November 12, Minister of Defense Silva told the Ambassador that the GOC view on Palanquero is that there should be "no new Manta" and "no major construction." Still, some Colombian military officials are eager to see increased activity at

Palanquero because they believe this would serve as a deterrent to Venezuela. GOC officials will also likely engage you regarding the USG timeline for implementation of the DCA.

PALANQUERO HUMAN RIGHTS CASE

13. (C) Air Combat Command (CACOM-1) at Palanquero Air Base had been suspended from U.S. assistance over controversy surrounding the Colombian Air Force bombing of the village of Santo Domingo in 1998, resulting in the death of 17 civilians. That suspension was lifted in early 2008 after a judge found two of the pilots guilty of manslaughter. On September 24 a superior court elevated the charges to murder and ordered an investigation into then Major Sergio Garzon Velez, now a Colonel and the Deputy Commander of the Palanquero Air Force base, for his involvement in the incident. Garzon is scheduled to transfer before the New Year. Given past cooperation, Garzon's transfer, and determination by the Colombian civilian judicial system, Post considers the Colombian Air Force to have taken effective measures to permit continued USG assistance to the Air Combat Command in Palanquero. Palanquero has received ten T-37 aircraft and training on aircraft maintenance -- approximately \$6 million in U.S. assistance. (See reftel)

VENEZUELA ON THE MIND

14. (C/NF) Heightened tensions between Colombia and Venezuela in since the October 24 murders of nine Colombians in Venezuela, followed by President Chavez' November 8 exhortations to Venezuelans to prepare for war, the GBRV's November 19 destruction of two foot bridges crossing the Colombia-Venezuela border and the suspension of all bilateral trade have given rise to intense public and private complaints over perceived U.S. abandonment of its traditional ally, Colombia. Both the Foreign Minister and Colombia National Police Director have expressed concern to the Ambassador that the USG had not spoken out in support of Colombia's reasoned handling of the situation. You will likely receive similar comments from GOC officials during your visit as they try to gauge the USG's views of the increased regional tensions. In fact, your visit will be perceived as symbolic security reassurance.

Consternation Over Corruption in the Navy

15. (SBU) Your visit will provide a welcome opportunity to underscore the USG commitment to protecting human rights and to rooting out corruption. A high profile narco-corruption case against a retired rear admiral appears poised for dismissal amidst controversy, raising concerns about impunity for flag-rank officers. Guillermo Arango Bacci was forced to retire in 2007 based on evidence that he had conspired with drug traffickers to help them evade U.S. and Colombian interdiction patrols. Admiral Barrera took the additional step of referring Arango Bacci's case to the civilian Prosecutor General's Office for criminal charges; the case was nearing a guilty verdict by mid-2009. On November 3, however, a new prosecutor assigned to the case petitioned the Supreme Court to absolve Arango Bacci on grounds that the investigation failed to prove the admiral's guilt. To make matters worse, both the Prosecutor General's Office and the Inspector General's Office denounced Admiral Barrera and other senior naval officers for falsifying evidence to frame Arango Bacci. Ambassador Brownfield publicly defended Admiral Barrera's actions in referring the matter to the civilian courts, which drew accusations of interference from one Supreme Court magistrate and the Colombian press. However, it laid down the marker that we believe allegations of military corruption must be investigated -- preferably in civilian courts.

CONFLICT STALLED, PEACE DELAYED

¶6. (S/NF) The GOC made dazzling progress against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 2008: the deaths of three Secretariat members, the liberation of 15 political hostages, including three Americans, and record high desertions. Progress in 2009 has been sluggish, however, with the FARC carrying out asymmetrical attacks on selective soft targets as the Colombian military tries to grind them down in a slow war of attrition. Some analysts have also pointed to lower operations tempo due to local commanders' concern of being accused of human rights abuses. Sensitive reporting suggests the GOC is quietly probing the FARC and National Liberation Army (ELN) to open a dialogue, though these efforts appear to be far from fruitful. We do not expect any serious progress on this issue until after the elections; the guerrilla groups will likely wait to see whether Uribe will repeat in office before considering a broader peace process.

THE COLOMBIA STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

¶7. (SBU) Since your August visit, Diego Molano was appointed the head of Social Action (Accion Social) -- Colombia's development agency -- and the titular head of the GOC's National Consolidation Plan (PNC) effort, filling a civilian leadership vacuum. Still, civilian agencies continue to be reluctant to devote their budgets to the effort, leaving the Ministry of Defense organizationally in front. Without clear budget commitments, it will be difficult to make the National Consolidation Plan an institution of the Colombian state and not just a policy of the current administration. Other challenges continue to be the lack of a clear GOC strategy to transition from military to police; weak justice sector presence; and rigidity in the GOC's zero illicit crops policy (wherein communities must cease all illicit cultivation before alternative development assistance can begin). Despite these challenges CSDI implementers continue to make progress. The Embassy is giving serious consideration to activating the 'Northern Band' as the fourth CSDI priority zone (initially the area in the south of Cordoba and northwestern Antioquia known as Bajo Cauca).

BROWNFIELD